

Who is going to care for an ageing population?

Personal social services is already an industry struggling to keep up with demand and surviving on low resources, but the future poses even greater challenges when you consider the UK's ageing population. It is within this context that migrant workers are increasingly being employed to provide long-term care for older people. The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) is currently collaborating with researchers in Ireland, the USA and Canada on a comparative project to examine the current need and future demand for migrant health and social care workers in ageing societies¹. The research explores experiences of migrant workers in residential and nursing care homes and home care provision, their employers and older people; and the impact of immigration regulations on the care sector and the employment of migrant workers.

Emerging findings for the UK indicate that migrant workers play a central role in the care sector. Using Labour Force Survey data, researchers found that foreign-born care workers account for over 20% of the social care workforce in many UK regions, while in inner London they account for over 70% of care workers. Eastern European countries, in particular Poland, as well as Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Nigeria and India are amongst the main countries of origin of migrant care workers.

Demand for migrant workers in the care sector was found to be associated with employers' perceptions and experiences of a shortage of UK-born workers. Around half of the employers surveyed, including those from care homes for older people and home care agencies, reported difficulties in recruiting UK-born workers. This was also the case for two thirds of employers who were already employing migrant workers. Employers considered recruitment difficulties to be connected to low pay levels for care work, compared with other types of jobs.

While there may be demand for migrant workers to 'fill the gaps' in the provision of care for older people, interviews with migrant care workers raised significant problems. These were mainly regarding working conditions, experiences of inequalities and discrimination, and unequal access to employment rights. Their experiences were shaped both by race and by immigration status.

"It's not only the day to day treatment that you get at work, but ... the wage range, where most ... citizens of the United Kingdom get paid more than other people from Eastern Europe, or carers from Africa, or... Asia, who will be doing the same work, same hours, or even working more than the people that are getting paid more."
(Care worker from Zimbabwe)

Dr Isabel Shutes, COMPAS researcher, explained that 'the findings so far reveal potential workforce shortages within the care sector and possible future demand for migrant workers, especially in the light of funding constraints within social care provision and employers' experiences of recruitment and retention difficulties. Likewise, our findings highlight concerns about the implications for migrant care workers regarding their rights and conditions of employment, as well as for older people regarding the quality of care.' Final reports on the national research findings in the UK, Ireland, USA and Canada, as well as a comparative overview report, will be published at the end of this year.

¹ The research, with funding from Atlantic Philanthropies and the Nuffield Foundation, involves COMPAS, the Oxford Institute of Ageing, University of Oxford (UK); the Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University (USA); the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, National University of Ireland, Galway; and the Canada Research Chair in Comparative Health Labour Policy, McMaster University (Canada).